DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 309 CS 011 738

AUTHOR Oldfather, Penny
TITLE Spinning Plates or Launching Ships? Outcomes of Motivation for Literacy Learning.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; *Literacy; Longitudinal Studies; Program Descriptions; *Student Motivation
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Research; *Meaningfulness; *Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

Drawing from examples from a longitudinal study of students' perceptions of their own purposes in learning, this paper examines outcomes of an emancipatory view of intrinsic motivation for literacy learning that centers on a view of the "learner as agent in the construction of meaning." The paper traces the development of students' experiences of epistemological empowerment--the sense of intellectual agency and ability to know that emerges from a strong sense of the integrity of an individual's processes of constructing meaning. Students collaborated as researchers in the investigation as they moved through elementary, junior high, and high school contexts. Contains 17 references and 2 notes. (Author/RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 371 309

Spinning Plates or Launching Ships?
Outcomes of Motivation for Literacy Learning

Penny Oldfather

The University of Georgia

427 Aderhold Hall

Athens, Georgia 30602

(706) 542-4325 (W)

(706) 369-6723

FAX: (706) 542-4277

Bitnet: Poldfath@uga

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

P. Oldfather

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, Louisiana
April, 1994

Running Head: OUTCOMES IN LITERACY MOTIVATIONS

CS011738

Abstract

Drawing from examples from a longitudinal study of students' perceptions of their own purposes in learning, this paper examines outcomes of an emancipatory view of intrinsic motivation for literacy learning that centers on a view of the *learner as agent in the construction of meaning*. The paper traces the development of students' experiences of epistemological empowerment. Epistemological empowerment is a sense of intellectual agency and ability to know that emerges from a strong sense of the integrity of one's processes of constructing meaning. Students collaborated as researchers in this investigation as they moved through elementary, junior high and high school contexts.

Spinning Plates or Launching Ships?

Outcomes of Motivation for Literacy Learning

In her new edition of The Art of Teaching Writing, Lucy Calkins (1994) suggests that "there is a world of difference between motivating writing and helping people become deeply and personally involved in their writing". I disagree. Deep and personal engagement is exactly what motivation for literacy learning should be about.[1] Calkins' perception reflects what I believe to be a common but troublesome view among educators about the nature of motivation.

Though Calkins and I differ about what motivation is (or should be) about, we share common ground about desirable outcomes for literacy learning. Calkins (1991) reported that in earlier days she had used a circus metaphor for the role of the reading/writing teacher: one who keeps plates spinning on sticks. She later took issue with her own plate-spinning metaphor and argued that the literacy teacher's role is a a launcher of ships. In both metaphors, the teacher is facilitating, and both situations might be viewed by some as learner-centered. But consider the contrasts: The first metaphor conceptualizes learners as spinning plates, and situates them as busy, but fixed in their tasks, confined to one place (not going anywhere)! Student plate spinning activities are maintained (and controlled) by the teacher. The second metaphor captures a

---

1 The term literacy is used here to encompass a wide range of literate actions in which tools of language employed.

vision of learners as ships preparing and launching important and exciting journeys for independent exploration of a large and expansive world. They are facilitated by a teacher whose goal is to enable them to pursue their own courses as learners. The plate spinning metaphor leaves the teacher in control. The ship-launching metaphor presents opportunities for learners' empowerment. A motivational outcome of meaningful empowerment must be situated within a social context in which the individual perceives that empowerment.

The Learner as Agent in the Construction of Meaning

My aim in this paper is to present a view of intrinsic motivation for literacy learning based on social constructivism, and to illustrate some outcomes of this form of motivation through examples drawn our longitudinal research . I argue that an epistemologically-based construct of motivation for literacy that is centered on the *learner as agent in the construction of meaning* (Oldfather & Dahl, in press) will move us along toward a holistic and <u>emancipatory</u> view of intrinsic motivation. Within this construct, motivation and learning are not separate from each other. Motivation is embedded within the learning process. Teachers holding a social constructivist stance (respecting students as <u>agents</u> in the social construction of meaning) are able to support not only empowerment for *action* (or self-determination), but empowerment for *knowing*. I call this *epistemological empowerment*: Epistemological

empowerment is "a sense of intellectual agency and ability to know that emerges from a strong sense of the integrity of one's processes of constructing meaning" This outcome is possible when a teacher shares the ownership of knowing (Oldfather, 1992). It is also a potential outcome for participants within collaborative research settings (Oldfather, 1993b).

Classroom cultures that support epistemological empowerment have goal orientations of collaborative construction of meaning. Emphasis is on understanding - rather than on getting "right answers." Paul was a sixth grade student researcher in Sally Thomas' classroom at Willow school. Lily understood Sally's emphasis quite clearly (Oldfather, 1993a), explaining, "She helps us build our thoughts." Paul agreed:

> One of the things I love in school is that we're trying to learn - not just get the right answer. That's really good. You want to get the right answer, but you still learn. You do better because learning is more important than getting the right answer (Oldfather, 1993, p. 674).

This work is informed by a large literature on intrinsic motivation. For example, Csikszentmihalyi's (1978) emergent motivation, Deci and Ryan's cognitive evaluation theory (1987), Maehr's construct of continuing motivation, the work of Carole Ames (1984, 1992), John Nicholls and his colleagues (Nicholls, 1989; Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993), as well as Barbara McCombs and her colleagues (McCombs, 1991; McCombs & Marzano, 1990). (See

Oldfather, 1992, 1993; and Oldfather and Dahl, in press for a full description of this social constructivist framework, and for further evidence of the findings presented here)

Drawing from a five-year longitudinal research on students' views of their own purposes in learning across elementary, junior high, and high school contexts (Oldfather & McLaughlin, 1993), I will share examples of students' growing sense of emancipatory knowledge construction. I begin with examples from Florencia in elementary school.

Outcomes in Elementary School: "Getting What's in My Mind"

Florencia was a sixth grade student from Argentina who had been in the United States since the third grade. She was a student researcher in Sally's classroom. Florencia read her rain poem aloud for me:

> The rain came down,
> Making the sounds that would only be heard on the tiniest drums in the world.
> The living drop of nature.

I asked Florencia about the source of her image of the tiniest drums in the world: With brown eyes sparkling, Florencia responded: "If you set your mind to it, you can hear it. If you start thinking about it, you're there, and you're feeling the drops. You can hear the sound and everything!" Florencia often experienced deep engagement as both a writer and a reader in her elementary school. In one of our early interviews I posed some open-ended questions:

Penny: What's the thing you love to do the most?"

> Florencia: Well, I guess it's writing, but also math, and reading.
>
> Penny: Can you put your finger on why you like writing the best of those three?
>
> Florencia: Well, I can express my feelings. In reading a book, the feelings are already there, and you get to read the feelings of the author. But in math there isn't very much feeling, and in writing you get to express *your* feelings. I just enjoy the writing the most, because sometimes I can be funny in stories, and sometimes I can really get what's in my mind. (Oldfather, 1993a, p. 676)

In her elementary classroom, Florencia had constructed a sense of herself as reader and author, and viewed her experiences in literacy in personal ways that served as a means of self-expression, tapped her creative talents, and served as a source of self-knowledge. ("Sometimes I can really get what's in my mind)." The outcomes reflected in Florencia's words (as well as through my observations of her classroom and her writing) are constructions about herself as a poet, humorist, and reader. They are also constructions about the values of literate activity -- as enjoyable, useful, and personally relevant for her life.

Outcomes in Junior High School: "My Thoughts Have Been Erased"

When Florencia went to junior high, the goal orientations and outcomes were drastically different (See Oldfather and McLaughlin, 1993). She described her concerns at the National Reading Conference in 1991:

> Free writing has almost completely ended and a boring grammar book has taken its place. I really don't understand why we need a grammar book. You are probably saying for practice, but I think that we would get more practice if we corrected our own writing. I

> wouldn't object to one day of grammar, to teach how to be correct, but when it continues day after day after, day, and takes the place of writing, it really makes me mad.
>
> Without writing, we aren't able to share our talents with other people. Writing is the kind of thing that needs to be done continuously. When I first started to write [in elementary school, I couldn't wait to get all of my ideas down on the paper. *Now it's as if the paper has been taken away and all of my thoughts have been erased.* If you don't have all of those ideas in your mind, you aren't going to write.

The outcomes valued in Florencia's junior high school were primarily those of achievement and of getting the "right answers," rather than constructing meaning. "All my thoughts have been erased." Students had little voice or choice about their learning activities and experienced less relevance and few intrinsic purposes for learning.

Abigail, a student researcher also presenting at NRC that year had similar concerns and criticized the assessment practices in junior high:

> My [junior high] school uses scantron. *Fill-in-the-bubbles*--That's what my math teacher calls it. All this is doing is teaching kids that learning is making dots on a paper. I think teachers like scantron because it saves them time, and there's really nothing wrong with saving time. But then learning goes down because all kids know is either *who* or *where* or *when*. That does not take very much thought. But what about *why*, for instance. Why did Thomas Edison invent the light bulb? Something like that. It would get us really *thinking*, not just knowing facts.

Florencia's concern about the approach to teaching grammar and Abigail's critique of the scantron assessment practices reflect their discomfort with the dominant epistemology and goal orientations within their junior high school culture. (They did not use those words). Many of

their teachers viewed learning as transmitted rather than constructed and students felt the differences.[2] They were also aware of the teacher directedness and students' lack of power. Again, a comment from Florencia:

> In junior high, you are looking at the teacher more. They like to be in charge. They don't want people talking about things, or getting out of hand, or whatever. They want to be the people up there and in charge. They would rather not have us in it so much.

Nicki shared Florencia's experiences:

> If a voice could just come out of us. If we could just start talking to one another. . . I would be more awake. Just to hear, instead of the teacher's voice all the time, to hear another kid get up and say something, like, "Oh, that is a good idea!" If any of us could just say something about, or [add] something, or disagree. Anything...That is what helps us learn.

Clearly, the sense of voice and epistemological empowerment that Florencia, Nicki, and their fellow student researchers developed through their experience in elementary school was not nurtured in junior high school. Even so, they were acutely aware of the differences between the school contexts, and sustained a sense of critical reflection about the outcomes -- a sense that they carried with them into high school.

Outcomes in High School: Becoming Educational Theorists

Now in high school, Florencia and her fellow student researchers ponder the processes and outcomes of schooling as seasoned educational theorists. To illustrate a case in

---

2 This was not the case for all the classes. Notable exceptions were the "block" courses integrating language arts and social studies, as well as drama courses.

point: In a focus group discussion, our team of student researchers (now in high school) were looking back across the years of our longitudinal study. They were trying to make sense of the changes in their learning across contexts, and considering the varying motivational and learning outcomes they had experienced. John raised the issue of whether their elementary school had prepared them adequately in science. There, the textbooks were generally used only as resources to supplement the science curriculum that was negotiated between students and teacher. John's seventh grade science teacher was concerned that he had not learned some material that should have been covered before seventh grade. Florencia had challenging questions in response to John's concern: How did that teacher know what 'should' have been covered? Who should determine what the curriculum should be, anyway? Is there only one right sequence? Her questions gave rise in the research group to discussion about what curriculum structures or formats will accomplish goals of both motivation and competencies. (We'll let you know if the students work that out!)

Last May I thought maybe our research was about completed. But the students disagreed. They want to conduct participatory research in their high school next year. They want to know more about how teachers think about issues of motivation in their classrooms; how teachers make decisions about ways to motivate students. As part of their data collection, they will write dialogue journals and

conduct taped interviews and focus groups. My part of the research will be to study what takes place as they are involved in their research projects. We will be connected through e-mail, to facilitate our communication. The e-mail text will also be used as data for our research.

The story of our collaboration is not without its ups and downs. There were times when I arrived in California for interviews and a few students had forgotten about our meetings. There are times when we worry that we have lost some of the camaraderie that we had established earlier, because of the difficulties of distance in time and space. There are times we all feel overloaded. The students have very busy schedules, and some of them are dating now. I have no way to predict how well they will carry through on the new project. But it was their idea -- and most of them are still quite involved. One student asked me if I would still work with them when they go to college. I'm not sure about that.

In Retrospect

The truth is that when I began working with the student researchers in 1989, I had no conception of what would develop. I had no idea whether we would launch a ship or sink a ship, and sometimes I am still not sure. But we have not been bored. And this has not been a plate spinning effort. There have been serendipitous outcomes -- including opportunities for the students (and for me) to apply our literacy skills. We present our findings together at

scholarly meetings. Three student researchers are currently collaborating on an article Theory into Practice. The students have experienced agency in the construction of meaning not only through their experiences in Sally Thomas' classroom, but through our collaboration in research (Oldfather, 1993b). They believe that they have developed insights into educational values and motivational processes, tools for enhancing their own motivation, enhanced self-esteem, knowledge about research processes, and opportunity to make a difference. I believe I have, too.

References

Ames, C. (1984). Competitive, cooperative, and individualistic goal structures, Journal of Educational Psychology, 76, 478-487.

Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. Journal of Educational Psychology, 84(3). 261-271.

Calkins, L. M. (1994). The art of teaching writing. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Calkins, L. M. (1991). Living between the lines. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1978). Intrinsic rewards and emergent motivation. In M. Lepper & D. Green (Eds.), The hidden costs of reward: New perspectives on the psychology of human motivation (pp. 205-216). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Deci, E., & Ryan, R. (1987). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. New York: Plenum Press.

McCombs, B. L. (1991). Motivation and lifelong learning. Educational Psychologist, 26(2), 117-127.

McCombs, B. L. & Marzano, R. J. (1990). Putting the self in self-regulated learning: The self as agent in integrating will and skill. Educational Psychologist, 25(1), 51-69.

Maehr, M. (1976). Continuing motivation: An analysis of a seldom considered educational outcome. Review of Educational Research, 46(3), 443-462.

Nicholls, J. G. (1989). The competitive ethos and democratic education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nicholls, J. G., & Hazzard, S. P. (1993). Education as adventure: Lessons from the second grade. New York: Teachers College Press.

Oldfather, P. (1991, December). Multiple perspectives on a qualitative study of motivation in a whole language classroom: Student co-researchers, classroom teacher, and researcher. Symposium presented at the 41st annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Palm Springs, CA.

Oldfather, P. (1992, December). Sharing the ownership of knowing: A constructivist concept of motivation for literacy learning. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Oldfather, P. (1993a). What students say about motivating experiences in a whole language classroom. The Reading Teacher. 46(8), 672-681

Oldfather, P. (1993b, April). Facilitating participation and ownership through engaging students as co-researchers. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA.

Oldfather, P., & Dahl, K. (in press). Toward a social constructivist reconceptualization of intrinsic motivation for literacy learning. Journal of Reading Behavior: A Journal of Literacy.

Oldfather, P., & McLaughlin, J. (1993). Gaining and losing voice: A longitudinal study of students' continuing impulse to learn across elementary and middle level contexts. Research in Middle Level Education. 17, 1-25.